

Revitalizing the Squadron: The Beating Heart of the Air Force

Eagles Think Tank
Class 17A
Squadron Officer School
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Executive Summary

The SOS Class 17A Eagles Think Tank was tasked to answer the following issue: “Today's squadrons are not the squadrons of old, and perhaps are not the units they need to be for current and future Airmen. UMDs haven't changed since the 1960s, yet we've lost the manpower in them to care for our Airmen. Discuss how the squadron could be the place where Airmen learn to be joint warfighters.” To further define the problem and focus of our task, Eagles Think Tank used General David L. Goldfein’s memorandum to Airmen, “The Beating Heart of the Air Force...Squadrons!” Ultimately, we defined the overall mission as identifying the primary challenges facing squadrons today with respect to the goal of returning squadrons to their status as the beating heart of the Air Force. Through brainstorming among Think Tank members, utilization of online crowdsourcing and survey techniques, and analysis of the resulting data, Eagles Think Tank identified two primary findings: squadrons must have the ability to spend more time together as a unit, and a stronger emphasis must be placed on squadron-level leadership while deemphasizing the roles of upper echelons of command. While further survey completion/data analysis should take place to further validate and expand upon our results, any course of action taken to align the squadron construct with the Chief of Staff’s vision must address these two concepts before meaningful change will occur.

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It is time to revitalize the squadron as the warfighting core of our Air Force. Our vision demands that 'squadrons be highly capable, expeditionary teams who can successfully defend our Nation's interests in both today's and tomorrow's complex operating environments. We will succeed only when our squadrons are the cohesive, ready, and agile fighting forces that the Air Force, Combatant Commanders, and the Nation requires.

– General David L. Goldfein, CSAF

Revitalizing the Squadron: The Beating Heart of the Air Force

Based on questions posed in a letter to Airmen by Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General David L. Goldfein, students from Squadron Officer School (SOS) Class 17A were tasked to think critically about the challenges facing squadrons today. Specifically, we set out to identify reasons why squadrons are not currently the “Beating Heart of the Air Force” and what factors are preventing squadrons from being the foundational building block where we develop, train and build members of a cohesive, ready, and agile combat force. With limited time and limited resources for collecting relevant data, Think Tank Eagles' primary mission was restricted to identifying key findings and providing a well-defined starting point for future analysis and solution-building.

Brainstorming and Initial Data Gathering

During the first week of our five-week timeline, we decided to use the website Reddit as a tool to share ideas among the 27 members of our team, as well as to solicit feedback and ideas from anyone else who was willing to **help**. Reddit, a social media platform, allows users to post initial ideas that other participants can vote on and reply to. By creating a specific “subreddit” (a webpage within reddit.com dedicated to a particular topic) we were able to invite our Think Tank group, members from the rest of Squadron Officer School, and members from our home station units to view, vote, and comment on proposed ideas, initially generated from our own Think Tank topic submissions and brainstorming sessions. We used the voting function to determine

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which ideas generated the most interest and ultimately had 490 unique participants vote on the 44 submitted ideas. We sorted through the ideas and arrived at the top five most common, which we labeled as “Core Concepts”.

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We identified these five Core Concepts from the brainstorming phase:

1. A Squadron should be manned to accomplish recurring tasks associated with its primary mission, and duties not directly supporting the squadron mission should be removed from the squadron
2. Squadron size is a key factor in forming squadron identity
3. Squadrons must have a manageable workload to foster community
4. Time spent as a squadron (being physically present amongst other unit members) improves unit cohesion
5. Squadron Commanders should have greater influence over people and resources

We used these core concepts as the hypotheses that drove the formation of our survey questions. During the brainstorming and initial data-gathering phase of this project, the Secretary of the Air Force, Ms. Deborah Lee Jones, and Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General David L. Goldfein, released a memorandum regarding upcoming changes addressing the additional duties concept. This altered our focus on the first core concept, which was not included in our analysis. Also, several other subjects were proven to be unrelated to the identified core concepts (or any potential relation proved to be statistically insignificant) and were not included in our key findings. These peripheral subjects will be further explained throughout the methodology and analysis portions of this paper.

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Methodology

Think Tank Eagles worked with the Air University Integration Cell to build an unbiased, 13-question survey to test our core concepts. We used these questions to test perceptions of unit cohesion and mission focus. We also directly asked the following question: “Which factors are obstacles in making the squadron the heartbeat of the Air Force?” This specific survey question allowed participants to select up to three options from a list of several subjects, including the five core concepts that we had identified in our brainstorming phase. These responses helped us to measure respondent perception of those squadron obstacles and compare them with questions measuring the practical effects of the obstacles.

We established a five-day window to allow individuals to complete the survey. In total, 267 Squadron Officer School and Senior Noncommissioned Officer Academy students responded to our survey. Given the forum in which the survey was disseminated, our respondents were almost exclusively Company Grade Officers and Senior Non Commissioned Officers. Additional surveys and further analysis is required to gather inputs from a more diverse sample group (to include Field Grade Officers, junior enlisted, civilians etc.) to validate these findings amongst a wider demographic. Even with the limitations of our data-gathering, we believe that we have a large enough sample size from a broad spectrum of officer and enlisted backgrounds to provide valid conclusions.

Data Analysis

While we fully expected squadron manning and additional duties to be primary themes of our investigation, we did not expect Secretary James and General Goldfein to release a memorandum on restructuring additional duties as we were releasing our survey. Since the highest levels of Air Force leadership are addressing these issues, we chose to focus our analysis

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on the remaining Core Concepts. However, we did complete a cursory review of responses related to this concept, and the responses validated the need for **change**: 73% of respondents desired embedded support within their units, 39% spend more than half their time completing additional duties, and 75% identified additional duties as a major obstacle to creating a cohesive squadron environment.

Commented [BP3]: Add data points from the survey that demonstrate the need for change. I think that showing right up front that our survey accurately identified this as a problem shows gives is credibility

We focused most of our data analysis on the remaining four Core Concepts. During brainstorming, we noted numerous complaints about squadron size being an issue for many members. However, when we looked at the survey results, only 18% of respondents identified squadron size as an actual obstacle to making the squadron the heartbeat of the Air Force.

Furthermore, we were unable to find a correlation between unit size and unit **cohesion**, preventing us from identifying this as a key finding. We believe it would be valuable for future Air University working groups to further investigate this idea with surveys specifically targeting larger and smaller Air Force squadrons to obtain a larger data set.

Commented [BP4]: Maybe close this paragraph off with a quick note about "getting rid of" this core concept. I think the wording they used in the presentation was it fell by the wayside. Just something to let the reader know that this concept was not proven, and therefore discarded

The **third core concept**, "Squadrons must have a manageable workload to foster community." was very interesting once we analyzed the data. 54% of survey respondents thought that "individual workload" was an obstacle to making the squadron the heartbeat of the Air Force. However, when we attempted to compare those responses with people perceiving their squadron as a family, we were unable to find a correlation. We did find that the respondents were putting in a lot of hours each week to meet mission **requirements**: 83% of respondents said that they work more than 45 hours per week and 43% said they work more than 55 hours per week. Since we could not correlate those hours to higher or lower feelings of unit cohesion, we did not arrive at any definitive **conclusions** and could not include this as a key finding. However, what we did find was important. People appear to frequently misidentify the

Commented [BP5]: Briefly explain what this core concept is. If the reader does not remember the entire list from earlier (and they likely won't) a quick couple of words to remind them what core concept we are about to talk about will get them on board and allow them to focus on the data we start presenting (same setup as concept number 4)

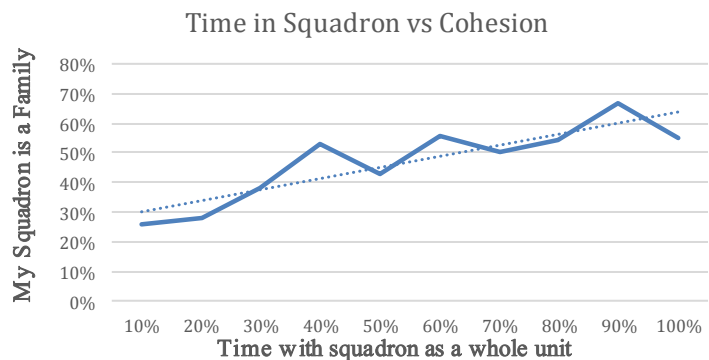
Commented [BP6]: How many hours? Survey data could fit here

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root causes of squadrons not operating at optimum levels. We suspect that most Air Force members are actually identifying symptoms rather than root causes. This phenomenon repeats on the next concept as well.

Core Concept number four, “Time spent as a squadron improves unit cohesion” refers to the time that Airmen are physically present with the other members of their squadron. Only 11% of survey respondents identified this as a problem, however, when we compared their responses to their perception of their squadron as a family, we discovered a strong correlation. This tells us that in spite of what people think, time spent together as a squadron is a significant factor in making a cohesive unit. This reinforced the idea that people are misidentifying the root causes. People see the symptoms but fail to recognize the underlying causes and in turn focus their feedback on the wrong points.



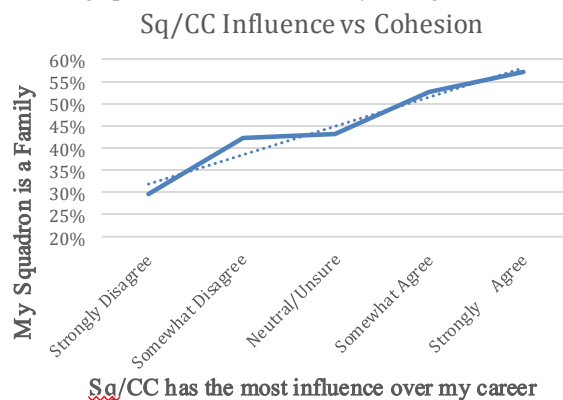
As shown in the graph above, we found a strong correlation between Airmen spending more time with members of their unit and those same Airmen having a higher perception of their squadron being like a family. It is important to note that this could be home-station, deployed or TDY time spent with squadron members. The key variable was time spent together (i.e., face-to-face), not the location in which that time was spent. In the modern Air Force, many activities that

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were once accomplished as a group are now left to the individual, greatly reducing the social interaction between members. These changes are as simple as computer-based training replacing briefings in the auditorium (where Airmen could interact before and after the presentations), to complex operational decisions leaving mobility Airmen deploying as 3-person crews rather than 100-person squadrons. Regardless of the motivations (efficiency, in many cases), the result has been a weakening in the social fabric of the squadrons. This became one of our two key findings.

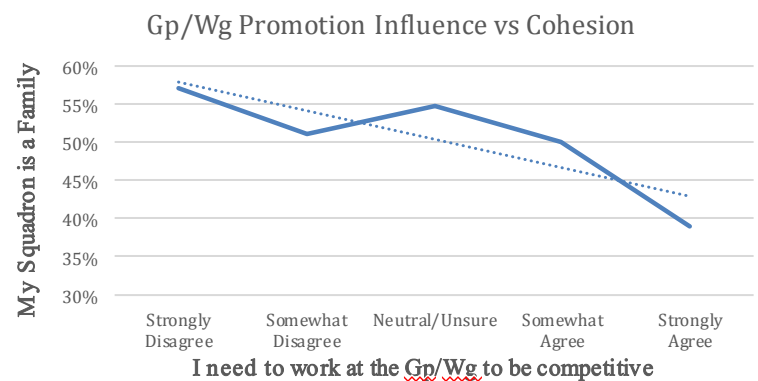
The final core concept we identified related to squadron commanders and their level of influence over people and resources. We were surprised to note that only 57% of respondents agreed with the statement: “My squadron commander has the most influence on my future.” We thought this percentage seemed low, but we found something interesting when we looked deeper into the 57% that agreed with that statement: the respondents who viewed their commanders as having the most influence over their future were much more likely to view their squadron as a family. As shown in the graphic below, there is a very strong correlation between these two perceptions.



Once we discovered this connection, we set out to determine if there was any correlation between responses if we looked at the issue from the other direction. What happens when

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Airmen view someone other than their squadron commander as having the most influence over their future? What we found was striking. The more respondents agree with the statement, “I need to work at the Group and Wing levels to be competitive for promotions, assignments, and awards,” the less likely they are to perceive their squadron as a family. We then looked at the responses to two other questions for further insight, and what we found was equally surprising. Shown on the graph below, 69% agree with the statement, “I need to work at the Group and Wing levels to be competitive for promotions, assignments, and awards.” More alarming though, 40% agree with the statement, “My Group and/or Wing detracts from my squadron’s ability to accomplish the mission.”



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In the survey, we gave respondents an opportunity to leave comments on each section. Below is a list of several of the more salient quotes from the comments on these questions.

- "...it is almost as if he is a staff officer rather than a commander."
- "He has bosses that tell him what to do."
- "It is the OG and WG that dictate opportunities."

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It became increasingly clear to us that, if the Air Force is serious about improving squadrons, it must empower squadron leadership. This concept became the second of our key findings from the study.

Key Findings

After careful analysis, we identified two key findings based on our data:

1. Airmen need to spend time together, face-to-face with other members of their unit, in order to build cohesion.
2. The Air Force must empower squadron leadership and reduce the influence of higher levels of command.

Commented [RGM10]: Recommend "identified two key findings based on our data." Makes it sound less like we subjectively determined what the findings should be, rather than went with what the data actually indicated.

Commented [BP11]: Is this the best word choice? It's the first time "camaraderie" has been used in any paper or the presentation. Consider use of unit cohesion instead

Summary and Recommendations

Think Tank Eagles' primary task was to identify the problem, or to better define the requirement, in relation to squadrons no longer acting as the beating heart of the Air Force. Through group brainstorming and crowdsourcing, we created Core Concepts. We then tested those concepts using a survey. Upon analyzing the survey responses, we identified correlations, which became our two key findings. We believe these two key findings represent root causes for the challenges facing our squadrons. Additional research will be valuable in validating and expanding upon these findings. Regardless, any action taken by Air Force leadership to revitalize the squadron should address our two key findings, as well as any related or additional issues identified by follow-up research. Until the Air Force addresses these root causes, we will not be able to revitalize the squadron and return it to its proper place as "the beating heart of the Air Force".

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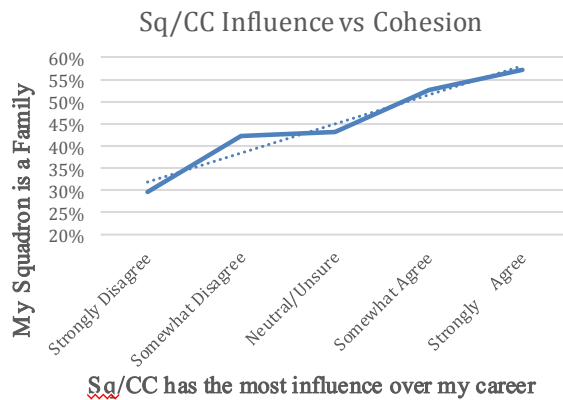
A Note on Methodology

Think Tank Eagles was limited in time and resources. Survey experts and industry-standard analysis software were not available given the aforementioned constraints. Despite this, we believe some useful information was generated from the gathered data.

Survey questions were posed in the form of statements that respondents could agree or disagree with on a provided scale:

Strongly Disagree - Somewhat Disagree - Neutral/Not Sure - Somewhat Agree - Strongly Agree

In order to correlate the answers of two survey questions, the base question was plotted on the x-axis using the above scale, with the compared questions on y-axis representing the people who either “somewhat” or “strongly” agreed. As an example, below is one of the charts used in our presentation:



The x-axis has the five possible responses to the survey question. The plot shows the percentage of respondents in each x-axis category that either “Strongly” or “Somewhat” agreed with the y-axis question. That is to say, for the above chart, of the people who “Strongly Disagreed” with

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“The Sq/CC has the most influence over my career,” 30% either “Strongly” or “Somewhat” agreed that “My squadron is a family.”

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